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Is Religious Liberty the Great American Illusion?

BY RABBI MARTIN ZIELONKA

Based on
*Religious Liberty—The Great American
Illusion* by A. C. Diffenbach.

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**Based on "Religious Liberty—The
Great American Illusion" by A. C.
Diffenbach.**

By Rabbi Martin Zielonkka

"The doctrine that ought to be preached in every pulpit, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and on every corner, is that the spiritual belief of the individual must have unrestricted freedom for its natural development and its own form of expression, because for one thing, sincere religious conviction is the vital element in political progress. The denial of both the principle and the practice of religious liberty and not any theories about religion is the greater crime in this day, for without such, America as we know it, could not exist and cannot survive." And yet—

"In the one hundred and fifty years of this Republic there has been a steady degeneracy of religious independence. The proof is to be seen in the intolerant and organized demands made for the first time in American history upon one legislature after another by church leaders not in one section only, but in every part of the land. There is hardly a state which has not been attacked. The Fundamentalist is not, as some believe, a Southern religious phenomenon. He is typical, innumerable, as large a part of Massachusetts and Minnesota as he is of Tennessee and Texas. A cross section of any State will show that America has a Fundamentalist mind."

These two quotations present the ideal and the reality of American life. We love to boast of American freedom, especially American Religious Freedom and we claim that it is the backbone of American civil-

ization. And yet, is that a fact? Does a study of American life show an ever increasing love for liberty and a broadening tolerance towards minorities that permits them to develop naturally and add their part to the culture of the next generations? What does the past tell us and what does the present disclose?

Dr. Diefenbach excuses the writing of his book by the statement that "Everybody is from twenty years to a generation behind except in the things he has studied. It is true of the layman in religion. That is why this book is written."

Everybody believes himself an authority on religion. And the less he thinks of it the more sure is he of his own convictions. And if those convictions are shared by a group and that group is the majority group in the city, county or state, he feels, in the words of William Jennings Bryan—"You can do what you please if you have the votes."

Now that may be true in many matters but it cannot be true of religion and it does not help in promoting Religious Liberty. For after all "A man may rely upon the authority of another for an opinion in law, in medicine or in business, to serve his civic rights, his health or his property but in these things his spiritual condition is involved. For his character he must rely upon himself because only what he himself knows and experiences can be of any service to him. He must prove all things. He must have perfect liberty. To the man who said he believed in being moderately liberal Cannon Liddon suggested that it meant as little to him as that a woman should be moderately virtuous."

While many may agree with this theory, their actions prove a contrary conception. They say, as a well known French journalist wrote "Gentlemen, when you are in power, we claim liberty in the name of your principles: when we are in power we refuse it to you in the name of our own."

What "many eminent and brave

churchmen of every Protestant faith are agreed is that freedom from external authority, the release from the binding creedal dogmas are absolutely imperative, not only for a true Christian Church but for the religious salvation of the people," but when the practical problem is presented they act differently. The conflict has been on since the founding of this people. It was not written into the constitution but was placed as one of the first amendments. Thomas Jefferson was the outstanding leader in favor of complete separation. He asked that his tombstone bear but two facts—that he was the founder of the University of Virginia and the author of the Bill of Religious Rights.

And the history of our people is the repetition of this story of conflict. The Baptists love to "refer to John Bunyan who remained for years in Bedford prison rather than allow a civil magistrate to dictate where he should go to Church or what he should preach. But it is the Baptists, led by men like John Roach Stratton, who today help to make a law in Tennessee which dictates what shall be taught to the whole people."

"The Presbyterians refer to the fight of the Scotch Covenanters against Bishops and prayer books, yet drive Harry Emerson Fosdick from one of their great pulpits.

"The Methodists tell how cheerfully John Wesley went about in England defying mobs and overcoming them; and yet they harassed and broke the heart of one of their most lovable teachers for his Bible Criticism.

"The Episcopalians refer with pride to those burnt at stake opposite Balliol College, and now they threaten and silence their clergy especially Bishop Lawrence who dared question the literal truth of the Apostles Creed."

Thus does Dr. Dieffenbach indict the great religious forces of America and thus does he draw the conclusion—"In no creedal church was there a single defeat of any Funda-

mentalist dogma. That holds to this day. In five years they have won control of the churches with a total membership running into more than 30 million souls. The Fundamentalists possess the land."

And yet—"No genuine American would silence the Fundamentalists. To do so would be to commit the same spiritual and democratic blunder that now curses the country." For "you can guarantee a man's property rights by the force of law but you can preserve his freedom of soul only by the spirit of free and tolerant religion."

Have conditions improved since De Toqueville wrote in 1830 that "there was no country where there was less independence of thought and less real liberty of discussion than in America?" Have conditions changed since Dieffenbach wrote this book, so that we can say that Religious Liberty is a reality and not an illusion? Or do the facts of the most recent present tell us "that religion now seems an enemy of both education and liberty—the churches have been brought to a status hardly higher in spiritual value than that of a Chamber of Commerce."

Let us look at the most recent facts that have come to public notice.

Durant, in his recent book "Transition", describes how he with other liberals went to Tarrytown to speak against the treatment given the Colorado Coal Strikers and how he and his fellows were hit by over ripe fruit in various stages of decay. Not only was the foundation of American life—freedom of speech, denied, but the fundamental of all religions, the brotherhood of man, and therefore, mutual responsibility, was denied also.

Miss Maude Royden, famous English preacher and head of Guild House, London, comes to the United States for a lecture tour. She is a woman of exceptional talent; she is a woman who has performed heroic tasks in religious endeavor; she is a woman of spotless reputation and one

to whom the young womanhood of England looks for guidance. A remarkable character and a keen mind combine to give her place and position in the religious life of the English speaking people.

But all her talents are wasted, her life work useless and her power for good blasted when the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Oak Park, Ill., learns that she indulges in an occasional cigarette. They cancel her contract for a lecture and they set forth to the world the reason—she smokes. Just what possible influence this could have on her ability as a lecturer or detract from her power as an influence for good, no one can discern. She naturally answers—"You might just as well say that chewing gum is of religious moment." And just why men who lecture before this organization are permitted to smoke or their contracts are not canceled because they smoke and the same privilege is not granted to woman one cannot understand. Perhaps, as one newspaper comments—"Miss Royden will discover that our most grievous sin is the sin of intolerance."

And if this is the feeling within the group, how can we expect a more liberal attitude toward the outside, especially when the group has the power of numbers to enforce its demands. This is one of the signs of the times which proves the place of religious liberty in the American environment and it does not prove that it is something real and not an illusion.

In the Senate of the United States rises the Senator from Alabama and attacks and castigates the Catholic Church, the faith that guides the lives of millions of our citizens. And when urged to cease, he continues his ramblings until the Senator from Arkansas and the party leader on the floor is forced to rebuke him and to openly state that he speaks for his party while the other man is simply speaking as an individual and without authority to speak for his

group. In answer thereto he is told that if he came to Alabama and delivered such addresses he would be taken out and "tarred and feathered." Senator Heflin may have said later that he was only joking and that in the heat of debate words are uttered that ought not to be taken literally, but the fact remains that words spoken under such conditions usually reflect the secret thoughts of the individual, they are the real thoughts that come forth when the thinking faculty is not under the control of caution or prudence. It speaks not well for Religious Liberty as the back-bone of democracy if, within the Legislative halls even one man should rise and utter such words. For we expect those who represent us at such places to be well grounded in the American traditions and fundamentals. The thesis of Dr. Diefenbach that Religious Liberty is only a great American Illusion seems to be carried out when we note such occurrences.

These are the most recent cases that have come to public notice. In each community there may be brought forth incidents recent or farther removed that will give color to similar indictments.

Is there no cure for this condition? Will the battle go on for untold generations with liberalism losing its ground more and more? Will we continue to pass laws as were enacted by Tennessee or achieve similar results by edict of a Text Book Commission as was done in Texas? "When they make such a law they stultify religious liberty and ravish the soul of America which was dedicated to freedom. They violate the principle of separation of Church and State."

There is a solution and it can be of value. There must be a change in the church and in the individual. It is not an easy process, but it is an effective one, if we will only give it a trial. Ministers must recognize that the chief business of the church is religion, and not politics and not bickerings in doubtful ethical values,

but upon religious fundamentals. The individual citizen must appreciate that "only in so far as citizens are willing to sacrifice themselves can States exist." These two axioms for progress in any republic must be recognized if we want to make Religious Liberty a glorifying factor instead of the great American Illusion. The state must guarantee freedom of speech and of faith, and "Religion must not be chiefly a federation against social ills, but a mighty power for spiritual emancipation." Therein lies our hope and our salvation. The religious forces of America have used their power against social ills and neglected their opportunities for spiritual emancipation. If they will use their power for the latter and withdraw from the former then will a new era rise for us and for future citizens of America. If they refuse to do that, then they will make the boast of our founding a greater illusion as the days pass on and our experiment will end in failure. We still have hopes that the religious forces of America will unite on a positive program, instead of a negative one, that they will foster the fine spirit with which our Republic came into existence and renou..ce the political power for which they have been striving and that they will accept the advice found in their own testament, "to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's," (Mark 12:17; Matthew 22:21.)

Thus as positive, instead of negative forces they will make Religious Liberty a Reality and not an Illusion. Amen.



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